DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 141 JC 910 414

AUTHOR Jones, Janet W.; Duffy, Donna K.
TITLE Activating Learning in the Classroom: Challenge, Collaborate, Celebrate.
INSTITUTION Middlesex Community Coll., Bedford, Mass.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Colleges; *Curriculum Development; Educational Strategies; *Faculty Development; *Instructional Innovation; *Program Descriptions; *Program Implementation; Seminars; Study Guides; *Teaching Methods; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

The Activating Learning in the Classroom (ALC) program at Middlesex Community College (MCC) is a year-long instructional and professional development program in which eight professors representing each college division volunteer to re-develop a course that they plan to teach within a year to promote active learning. The program begins at the close of the spring semester with 5 full days of seminars and continues with weekly seminars in the fall. During the seminars, professors analyze their own styles of teaching, the thinking of their students, and the materials in their course. As the seminars progress, the participants record their insights about teaching and learning into a course guide for their students to use throughout the semester. Each guide consists of an introduction to the course, a course description, an explanation of the professor's goals and objectives, and a detailed syllabus. The guides also include a large section of reading questions on the course material and focus questions that relate the material to interdisciplinary and multicultural issues, and the students' experiences. In addition, the guides include maps, calendars, text previews, cartoons, and directions for labs, journals, and papers. The guides serve three functions. First, they implement the ideas and information garnered in the ALC seminars. Second, they celebrate the particular creativity of each member of the faculty. Third, they provide a necessary concrete product that administrators can identify as the result of an instructional and professional development program. When asked to evaluate the ALC programs, each participating faculty member gave the program the highest ranking. (JMC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED336141

Activating Learning in the Classroom:
Challenge, Collaborate, Celebrate

Janet W. Jones and Donna K. Duffy
Middlesex Community College, Bedford, Massachusetts

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. W. Jones

D. K. Duffy

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

X Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

JC 910 414

1991

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Activating Learning in the Classroom:
Challenge, Collaborate, Celebrate

Janet W. Jones and Donna K. Duffy
Middlesex Community College, Bedford, Massachusetts

What is the challenge?

The expectations for community colleges in America are changing. Educators, grappling with questions raised by A Nation at Risk, are recognizing community colleges as premiere teaching institutions and are turning to them for answers. Students, facing new kinds of family demands and spiraling college expenses, are turning to community colleges in increasing numbers for the first two years of their college education. In the past year, the enrollment at Middlesex Community College in Bedford and Lowell Massachusetts has grown by 8.5% from 3250 students to 3526 students. Over the past 5 years, the number of students has increased 45%. These students are commuting students who must balance a job, a family, and their studies (34% work 21 hours or more, 12.5% have a family). Many are students who have met defeat in earlier educational experiences. They bring with them a variety of learning styles and often little confidence in their ability to succeed. Within one typical classroom at Middlesex, a teacher will face students who are not well prepared (22% read below the 9th grade level, 43% must take Basic Writing before entering the first semester of Composition, 98% need additional math to place into Pre-Calculus); students with learning disabilities (10%); students enrolled in English as a Second Language classes (5%); adolescents who are searching for answers; overextended young adults; and returning adults (22%) (L. Alves, personal communication, October 4,1990). Despite its name, it is difficult for a community college to provide a community for such a diverse population. Middlesex holds its classes on two campuses–an urban campus with a significant percentage of minority students and a suburban campus eleven miles away. Students arrive at the campuses for their classes and scatter as soon as they are finished. The classroom, therefore, incorporates students who are isolated within this diversity and teachers who are overwhelmed by the diversity. Middlesex professors looked at these challenges and asked how the classroom–in fifty minutes–could become a community for active learning.

How did we meet the challenge?

In 1987, the Dean of Staff and Program Development and faculty members at Middlesex Community College confronted these challenges. The first step was to visit LaGuardia Community College in New York and investigate their Integrated Skills Reinforcement (ISR) program for an answer. The college gave eight faculty members one course released time to participate in a workshop led by LaGuardia ISR Trainers. In the fall semester, each professor created a Learning Guide for one of their courses and then piloted the Guide during the spring semester. Although the creation of the Learning Guide encouraged professors to rethink the skill building aspects of their course, it did not stress flexibility and individual creativity. The focus of the ISR program was on improving basic skills for students, only a part of the answer sought by Middlesex. Professors expressed a need to learn more about their own teaching styles. They were experts in their fields but had had little or no training in the philosophies of teaching. Students expressed a need for a course guide that included greater variety and depth. They found the learning guides helpful but repetitive.

The Activating Learning in the Classroom Program (ALC) at Middlesex, originally funded by Title III, began in May 1988, as a step beyond LaGuardia's ISR and as an attempt to meet the needs of our community. We started by looking at the components of a classroom.

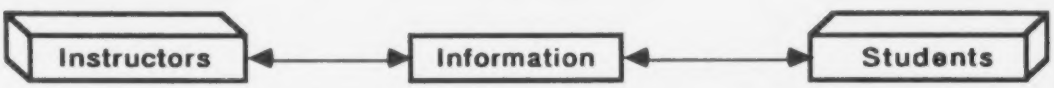

Figure 1: Equation of the Classroom

The classroom equation can be read in either direction. The instructor's task is to facilitate learning, and the student's task is to learn. There is a process to teaching as there is a process to learning. As K. Patricia Cross, Conner Professor of Education at the University of California at Berkeley, recently stressed, "How something is taught is as important as what is taught" (Cross, 1990). Numerous books are available that characterize factors involved in effective teaching (e.g., Katz and Henry, 1988; Lowman, 1984; McKeachie, 1986); but teachers must translate how such factors fit with their own style, their course content, and their particular classroom of students. Katz and Henry (1988) state, "The essence of good teaching is the greatest possible individualization of the teacher's responses to students, any reliance on

general formulas is in itself antidevelopmental and antieducational" (p. 4). An important factor in the ALC program is an appreciation of the individual style of each faculty member. There is no one right way.

The ALC Program offers instructors, already effective teachers, the opportunity to stand back and to reconsider the environment of their own classrooms. ALC is a year-long instructional and professional development program in which eight professors from each of the Divisions of the College volunteer to re-develop a course that they plan to teach within a year's time. The program begins at the close of the spring semester with five full days of seminars and continues with weekly seminars in the fall. During the seminars, professors analyze their own styles of teaching, the thinking of their students, and the materials in their course. Together, they clarify their individual goals for the course, then ponder the ways most effective to motivate a varied group of students to embrace them.

What are the strengths of the ALC Program?

One of the unique qualities of the ALC Program is that it is a faculty instructional and development program conceived, organized, and run by faculty. The two Coordinators are faculty members—a professor of psychology, and a professor of humanities. They are each given fifty percent released time; the other fifty percent of their time is spent practicing what they preach in their own classrooms. Colleagues, therefore, meet and discuss with colleagues. The faculty participants stress the importance of this exchange and commented (on an evaluation instrument created by an outside evaluator) that the ALC Program is a "splendid interdisciplinary opportunity to learn from each other, [and] be affirmed as professionals who continue to develop." "Its greatest strength is the opportunity it allows to 'step back' and examine my assumptions and methods. Much of a teaching style develops gradually and without a great deal of thought. I found it valuable to question why I am doing things in a particular way. I have found it exhausting and energizing."

The ALC seminars provide a lively structured forum for the discussion of a number of issues, all essential to the development of an active teaching and learning environment in the classroom. We discuss a myriad of issues: teaching styles, learning styles, and critical thinking skills; the rhythms of the semester and the use of space within the classroom; the incorporation of writing, collaborative learning, interdisciplinary and global issues; as well as ways to connect to the students' experiences and careers. See Tables 1 and 2:

TABLE 1

40 Hour ALC Summer Seminar

Topics:

- Learning equation (See ALC Logo)
- Cognitive development–Perry and Belenky
- Logical thinking–Bloom
- Learning styles–Kolb
- Frames of mind–Gardner
- Teaching styles
- Characteristics of effective instructors–Katz and Henry, Lowman, and McKeachie
- Nature of community college students
- General Education
  - Interdisciplinary
  - Multicultural
  - International
- Environment of the classroom
  - Classroom dynamic
  - Interpersonal rapport in the classroom
  - Risk taking in the classroom
- The framing of long term goals and short term objectives
- The use of cue words
- Design of reading questions and focus questions
- Introductory materials for a Course Guide
- The framing of paper assignments
- The use of journals
- Further ways to include writing inside and outside the classroom

Assignments:

- Materials using Kolb and Gardner
- Preparation of reading and focus questions
- Materials for the Course Guide covering the first week of the instructor's ALC course

---

TABLE 2

24 Hour ALC Fall Seminar
2 Hour Seminars Once Weekly for 12 Weeks

Topics:

- Classroom research–Cross and Angelo
- Collaborative learning
- The framing of cogent, concise, and cheerful directions
- Student diversity: cultures, ESL, the learning disabled, the physically challenged
- Gender differences
- Executive control–Weinstein
- Student stress
- Faculty stress
- The ups and downs of time and space within the semester and the classroom
- Student viewpoints as revealed in a round table discussion
- Expanded discussions of the topics introduced in the Summer Seminar

Assignments:

- Completion of the Course Guide
- Examples of ways to include classroom research
- Examples of ways to include collaborative learning
- Examples of clear and focused exam questions

The summer and fall seminars also provide crucial time for sharing and group critiquing of work in progress by colleagues who represent all the academic branches of the college. Participants find it most valuable to discover the similarities in the problems faced by every faculty member, no matter the discipline, and to participate in the ways in which each faculty member incorporates the new techniques.

As the seminars progress, the participants begin the challenge of translating their new insights about teaching and learning into a Course Guide for their students to use throughout the semester. The guide that is developed for each ALC course reflects the individual choices of the instructor and connects the students to the experience of learning. Between a hundred and two hundred pages, each Guide is just that–an individually designed guide to the course for the students' use–a road map that celebrates each professor's unique way ot teaching. The Course Guide begins with an introduction to the course, a course description, an explanation of the professor's goals and objectives, and a detailed syllabus. There is also a large section of reading questions on the course material (these questions are generally incorporated into the student's grade) and of focus questions that relate this material to interdisciplinary and multicultural issues, as well as to the students' experiences. In addition, the Guides include maps; calendars; text previews; cartoons; directions for labs, journals, and papers; and "occasional pithy, personal, wise, and whimsical comments from me," as one professor wrote.

What is the Immediate Impact of the ALC Program?

The ALC Course Guides are as diverse as are the instructors. One faculty member commented that "It creates a bridge between the course material, the teacher, and the student; but it still requires initiative, effort, and responsibility on the students' part." By connecting the instuctor, the information, and the students, the guides are a concrete representation of the goal of our model in Figure 1. Through them, faculty members have an opportunity to try out new approaches to presenting material, and students can experience supportive and personal comments from the instructor as they work through the material of the course.

The guides serve three further functions. First, in a tangible way, they put to use the ideas and the information garnered in the ALC Seminars. Second, they celebrate the particular creativity of each member of the faculty. And third, in the present society that values accountability, they provide a necessary concrete product that administrators may point to as the result of an instructional and

professional development program. Since the spring of 1989, the Guides have become a part of sixty courses, taught by twenty-one different instructors, and have been used by approximately fifteen hundred students. Over ninety percent of the students who were in ALC courses stated on a questionnaire designed by an outside evaluator that the Course Guide helped them to understand the material better and to achieve a higher grade. They wrote, "The Course Guide asked us to supply our own input and feelings--I loved it! If every class had something like this, I think I would like school better." "It's been a while since I had fun in the classroom. I need that kind of attention to do well. Thanks for letting me be myself, not my student number."

What has been the response to the ALC Program?

At the close of each year, the faculty are asked to respond to an instrument designed by an outside evaluator that asks for both quantitative and qualitative responses to the ALC Program. On the scale of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) 100% of the faculty participants rated the effectiveness of the ALC Seminars at a 5. On the question, "Did the experience [of the ALC Seminars] change the way you think about teaching and learning?" all but one of the participants responded, "Yes." One responded, "Yes/No." On questions asking for commentary, faculty responded, "Other colleges do not recognize the faculty's need for time off to rethink a course." "I know it is a little corny, but I feel as if my teaching is being celebrated." "The ALC Program is a time to reflect--a hardworking mini-sabbatical. "As the year ends, I find that I am rethinking not just my ALC class, but all my teaching." Time off for a professor to consider how best to teach is essential. By providing annual support of released time for eight professors from all of the Divisions, the college has made clear its commitment to effective teaching.

The ALC Program has been evaluated semi-annually by a Title III evaluator who wrote that the ALC Program "has the potential for making the greatest impact on faculty development, classroom teaching, and student learning of any program which [the evaluator] has witnessed at an institution of higher education in a long time."

What are the unique advantages of the ALC Program?

The ALC Program is unique because it provides for simultaneous growth in faculty and in students. The seminars are a multi-dimensional experience that not only expand a professor's knowledge of

new pedagogical approaches but also encourage a professor's experimentation with different teaching styles in order to discover which styles work best. At the same time, the program results in a concrete Course Guide for students--a guide that increases both student learning and student enjoyment. An important positive feature of the program is its low cost (under thirty thousand dollars per year). The primary expense of the program is in providing released time for the faculty participants and the Coordinators.

The ALC Program achieves real flexibility because of this support from within the college. The coordinators are colleagues, readily accessible to faculty and to administrators. The faculty participants are able to gather in the halls with the Coordinators to share ideas and experiences. Administrators are able to stop by an office for a discussion of new directions. The program grows from within, responding to the particular flavor of the college. The monetary investment in the ALC program is small, but the benefits over time are great. The sense of community and optimism created through the program extends beyond the space and time of the actual seminars. At the beginning of this spring semester, a member of the Nursing Division came by our offices to say that had she not participated in the ALC Seminars, she would not have felt comfortable in expanding the format of her course to include discussions of the war in the Persian Gulf. She added that because of the ALC Seminar discussions, she understood how to connect her course material to the students' experiences and thus how to guide them to their own future connections.

What are the new directions for the ALC Program?

As more faculty complete the ALC Program, we must consider where we go from here. Several areas appear possible:

- Programs for part-time faculty

  Over 50% of the Day Division Faculty are part-time. Approximately 300 part-timers teach in the Evening Division. Many of the part-time faculty have had little classroom experience and are interested in improving their teaching skills.

- Programs for past ALC participants

  Participants have urged that we continue the discussions and the interdisciplinary connections begun in the ALC Seminars.

- Participant observation in classrooms
- Loose-leaf course materials that can gradually be integrated into a complete Course Guide

Nancy Armes in an article on "The Future of the Community College" (1989) challenges that "we must learn how to evaluate teaching more effectively, how to involve faculty in that process, and how to better apply what research clearly indicates will work in the classroom" (p. 273). Through the collaboration among faculty, students, and administration, the ALC Program is a grass roots attempt to meet the challenges set forth by Armes.

References

Armes, N. (1989). The future of the community college. In T. O'Banion (Ed.), Innovation in the community college (pp. 266-282). New York: Macmillan.

Cross, K. P. (1990, June). Introduction to classroom research. Paper presented at the Second Annual U C Berkeley Faculty Development Institute Workshop on Classroom Research, Berkeley, CA.

Cross, K. P. & Angelo, T. A. (1988). Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for faculty. Ann Arbor, MI: National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning.

Katz, J. & Henry, M. (1988). Turning professors into teachers. New York: Macmillan.

Lowman, J. (1984). Mastering the techniques of teaching. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

McKeachie, W. J. (1986). Teaching tips: A guide for the beginning college teacher (8th ed.). Lexington, MA: Heath.

ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges OCT 11 1991